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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief examination of the factors involved in planning for and providing services to people, especially children, in light of diminished public funding. It is suggested that new services be related to existing services and that a consolidated system of service delivery be developed. Emphasis is placed on reevaluating the function of needs surveys in the political contexts in which they are used. (ED)

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LONG RANGE PLANNING FOR CHILDREN'S SERVICES

by
Irving Lazar

Over the last quarter of a century I've conducted a fair number of need surveys in a wide variety of communities. I did the surveys carefully and, each time amassed a mighty mountain of information.

In the course of time I tried various ways of organizing the task--I involved community people in developing and conducting and interpreting the data; I had community boards which decided which priorities should be set from the data--I involved recipients and influentials, consumers and providers of service--all the devices that we generally recognize as important to surveys and self-surveys. I went to elaborate lengths to insure that I had good samples, and the right statistical treatments to identify significant findings. I tried a variety of devices to assess the validity and reliability of my findings.

I did all this because I really believed that if I provided objective information, that the decision makers would thereupon act in a rational manner. It finally sunk into me that the only time rational decisions got made for rational reasons was when the issue was both non-controversial and unimportant.

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Since services to people are controversial, I found that the only times that the rational priorities which emerged from my objective needs data got implemented were those few times when I controlled the money for implementation. Since the real priorities are those of decision makers, it finally got through my thick skull that the only needs data I really needed had to do with the providers of resources--not the consumers of service.

Let me explain how I got to this heretical position, and to start that explanation to remind all of us of some very simple principles:

-to improve the lot of children and families we need to have a program that can be implemented

-if we're going to be able to implement it we need a staff and facilities

-in order to get staff and facilities with public support we need:

1) legislation that authorizes our activity, 2) regulations which let us do our job,

and 3) appropriations sufficient to pay our bills. And finally, we need to find a willingness to use the funds and the authorities available. All of us are aware of the federal impoundments which so severely hurt our neediest citizens. There is a lot of local impoundment of another sort: remember, only half of the limited 4A funds are being used this year because of local reluctance to provide matching funds.

Given this outline of the process by which we get--and keep--services to children, let me go back to the issue of needs studies and my several heresies. The first of which is that we don't need to do a needs analysis for the purpose of finding out what services are in short supply or what services children need.

To my knowledge, there is no civilian community in the United States which has enough of any kind of human service. Local people in Beverly Hills will tell you with a straight face that they need more mental health services. There are folks in Rochester, Minnesota who cannot get a doctor. There is a shortage of nursery schools in New Haven, Connecticut, and families on food stamps in Le Seur, Wisconsin. I'd wager that any kind of decently run human service program in any population center anywhere will develop a waiting list before they finish their first year of operation. Our problem is not one of finding out if the communities need services, or what kind of services they need. Every community needs more of everything. We don't need a study to discover that.

Aside from case-finding, which we shouldn't do until we are prepared to treat cases, there are only two useful pruposes I can see for a general study of needs. The first is to convince uncertain legislators and administrators that support of programs for young children will make them look good, will help re-elect them, will produce quick results, is consistent with their other programs, and will increase the size and strength of their agencies. The data of a needs study will not usually budge the people who have already made up their minds. Studies of welfare needs won't alter Senator Long's opinions about welfare recipients and

studies of Head Start will not convince most people that it is not a good way to raise IQ's or school achievement.

Remember too, that doing a study is a favorite political strategy for avoiding action. Often a study arouses expectations which cannot be satisfied, and so endangers rather than helps our cause. Disappointed people are not likely to be of much help. Often needs studies are undertaken as a matter of form, and only serve to let public enthusiasm die down. Doing a study is a favorite technique for appearing to do something without actually doing anything substantive about a problem. So often we don't need a study of needs. Often, a study will delay or harm obvious action.

If we must do a needs survey, we need to select the fewest number of data that will sell the uncertain, and collect it as cheaply and quickly as possible. Not one extra cent or minute should be devoted to this task. If in fact, there is a question of need in the minds of people, then it seems to me that you have to identify the smallest number of crucial questions which will make a difference to reasonably open minds.

To those who have made up their minds against you, it doesn't matter how precise your information or how impeccable your study is--they won't be changed by the likes of us.

The reverse is also true. If people are convinced that something is good, they will not pay attention to scientific data to the contrary. Under most circumstances, needs data will only affect the ambivalent. So the only time it pays to collect it is when the uncommitted can make a difference. And the only data worth collecting is that which will get them to take a stand.

The second reason I can see for a study of needs is to involve a lot of people in thinking about children. A community self-study is a useful way to develop commitment in a core of volunteers. Furthermore, it is very hard to challenge the validity of data which you have collected yourself.

Both of these reasons assume that there are a significant number of decision makers who are still open to being convinced, and that you can involve them or people they trust. In that situation, needs data can help our case, providing that we don't overwhelm people with more data than they care to handle, or bore them to tears, or spend so much time and money on data gathering that we lose track of our original purpose.

Data can support a case, but does not make the case.

I said earlier that the only time I could implement empirically and logically derived priorities was when I controlled all of the money. Usually other people control the money, and it makes much more sense to find out the priorities of the decision makers and design programs that will fit those priorities. Since every service is essential, and since each is related to the others, the ostensible function of a program is not really important; wherever you start, you can build systems which will deal with the whole of a child's development, even though you may not be able to reach all children or do all things at once.

The development of a campaign to meet a given set of needs can backfire badly if it's not related to the existing and the possible complex of resources available in the state or community. If you get support for a program but cannot find a good staff, you are likely to wind up with a poor staff that will become entrenched, and we would be better off with no program at all We don't help a child by settling for a bad program, because it is almost never possible to improve it once it is staffed. It is harder to sell training than service, but it is often essential if we care about kids.

If we can gather data, I believe that the information that can be most useful in developing and improving services is a careful examination of the resources already available in a community or region. It is important to know:

-what's out there already

-how much of it there is

-who is being served

-how well they are being served

-what ways the existing services are related to each other.

If we can relate our new services to the existing service network, we can get help instead of hell. Knowledge of resources is valuable because it tells us what's possible and where conflicts can occur. Indeed, such knowledge is far more valuable than data on the needs of children. Having such knowledge enables us to provide a needed service to other agencies, and is a step toward collaboration rather than competition.

In a time of decreasing national interest in services and what promises to be a long economic drought, our best strategy for programs may not be in a struggle with the other services for the shrinking dollars, but rather in leadership for a new system of service delivery.

In a battle with an Office of Aging or another categorical program for scarce dollars, programs for children will lose. But in a consolidated system of services, replacing the present categories, we can markedly improve services to children. My own view of the future in human services includes a replacement of categorical programs by a consolidated human service system.

Two dozen states are already on this road, and despite the opposition of the categorical interests, bills like the Allied Services Act will soon be passed, I think. Title XX is already a step in reducing artificial barriers between functional service areas.

We, in early childhood services and planning, can take leadership in this development and so influence its effects, or we can oppose it and not improve our chances of increasing service effectiveness. Just as it is clear to me that public schools will be housing day care programs five years from now, so it is also clear to me that the public will neither permit the continued splendid isolation of the schools from other agencies, nor continue to support the administrative dukedoms of categorical programs.

We can start now to take that leadership by helping our schools and other child-

serving agencies improve their present services so that they can speak with credibility for the next time when our country is willing to make substantial new investments in services. The scandalous diversions of Title I ESEA funds by school districts need to be corrected; the ridiculous costs being assigned by many districts to the fledgling efforts in bilingual education will surely kill those vital efforts if we don't control them. The fact that we have not effectively educated our publics is clear in every newspaper. There's plenty for us to do right now; if we do those jobs well, we'll build constituencies vocal enough that we won't need to figure out how to asses and measure needs.